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THE MASK BENEATH THE FACE

*Reading about and with;
Writing about and for:
Children*

E. L. KONIGSBURG



COMPLETED

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E.L. KONIGSBURG

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Foreword

BOOKS AND READING are keys to a healthy and meaningful future. Once the door to the world of books has been unlocked, the possibilities are endless. The principal mission of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress and its state affiliates is to stimulate public awareness of books, reading, literacy, and libraries. Each center is supported by private, tax-deductible contributions from individuals and corporations who share our belief that books and reading are vital ingredients in enriching individual lives and in fulfilling the promise of our democratic way of life.

"1989 – The Year of the Young Reader," a national reading promotion campaign initiated by the Center for the Book, stimulated a love of books and reading among young people through hundreds of projects throughout the country. First Lady Barbara Bush was honorary Year of the Young Reader chair. She graciously made appearances, filmed public service announcements, wrote supporting and congratulatory messages for projects, and hosted a White House reception to thank Year of the Young Reader participants and financial sponsors. Individual projects were developed in all fifty states in cooperation with corporations, national organizations, local libraries, schools, and civic groups. Significant projects were also developed and promoted by the state centers for the book which are affiliated with the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress.

The Florida Center for the Book, established in 1984 as the first statewide affiliate, made a unique Year of the

Young Reader contribution through its sponsorship, in cooperation with the Florida Freelance Writers Association, of a conference on writing for young readers. Authors, publishers, editors, illustrators, reviewers, librarians, and potential authors came together on October 21, 1989, for a fruitful day of discussion in Pembroke Pines, Florida. The keynote speaker, noted children's author Elaine Konigsburg, spoke eloquently and personally about how authors touch—and can shape—children's lives. The Center for the Book in the Library of Congress and the Florida Center for the Book are grateful to Elaine for her moving presentation and thoughtful expression of why children's books are important. We are very pleased to present her talk to a wide audience.

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for the Book*

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E.L. KONIGSBURG



MY MOTHER USED TO SAY, "If you really want to know someone, marry him or play cards with him." My mother would say that; she lived in a time when a lot of people believed that the only way nice women really got to know a member of the opposite sex was to marry him, and, besides, she was a terrific poker player. In these modern times when a person does not have to marry someone to *know* him, and the fine art of poker playing has moved out of the family living room and into the casinos of Atlantic City and Las Vegas, I would like to add that if you really want to know someone, take him to Mardi Gras.

Going to Mardi Gras had long been an item on my lifetime checklist of things to do before I die. Now that I've been, I can tell you that there are three things wrong with it. One, it is crowded. Two, it is gaudy. And three it is vulgar. On the other hand, Mardi Gras has three things to recommend it. One, it is crowded. Two, it is gaudy. And three, it is vulgar.

If you want *clean and orderly*, go to Disney World. If you want vulgarity that is considered to be good taste, go to Williamsburg. Mardi Gras, like the city that hosts it, has spontaneity and squalor and charm. There is something authentic about Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and despite its exaggerations of dress and deportment—perhaps, because of them—a person senses she'll find some truth there in the ungentrified French Quarter.

Throughout the French Quarter during Mardi Gras, people wore outfits that were outrageous and funny. They wore tinsel wigs and had their faces painted. Men dressed as women; women dressed as men. The fine lines that sep-

arate costume from dress, male from female, good taste from bad, disappeared.

Sometimes, under a layer of face paint or beneath a feathered mask, the last boundary—that between acceptable and unacceptable social behavior—also disappeared. Young women wearing masks and others with painted faces leaned over balconies and pulled down their panties or pulled up their tee shirts, exposing that—or those—which are normally hidden.

Strangely enough, it was the masks that seemed to me to be the most revealing. The masks held the key to the truth that I sensed there. Then the question became: Were people behind the masks exhibiting the persona of the mask they had assumed or were they showing their true character? Did the masks allow them to conceal their true selves? Or reveal them?

Were the false faces ones they could assume? Or were they ones they could hide behind?

Were they disguise? Or were they protection?

I arrived home wondering about the behavior behind the masks of Mardi Gras and asked my husband, the psychologist, Dr. David Konigsburg, "Do you think wearing a mask allows a person to be someone else, or do you think that a mask allows a person to be who he really is?" And my husband, the psychologist, Dr. David Konigsburg, answered, "Yes."

Before I could express my annoyance, he pointed out that in my work, I had said, *yes, they reveal* as well as, *yes, they conceal*. He also mentioned that my fascination with masks was nothing new. It had started with my very first book. With the very first scene of my very first book. He was right, of course.

Allow me, please to demonstrate.

Elizabeth, who is ten, begins her story (and my career as a writer) in *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley and Me, Elizabeth* as follows:

I first met Jennifer on my way to school. It was Halloween, and she was sitting in a tree. . . . I was dressed as a Pilgrim. . . . I had my head way back and was watching the leaves when I first saw Jennifer up in the tree. . . . She was sitting on one of the lower branches. . . swinging her feet. . . . [She was wearing] real Pilgrim shoes made of buckles and cracked old leather. The heel part flapped up and down because the shoes were so big that only the toe part could stay attached. Those shoes looked as if they were going to fall off any minute. . . .

"You're going to lose that shoe," I said.

The first thing Jennifer said to me was, "Witches never lose anything."

"But you're not a witch," I said. "You're a Pilgrim, and look, so am I."

"I won't argue with you," she said. "Witches convince; they never argue. But I'll tell you this much. Real witches are Pilgrims, and just because I don't have a silly black costume and carry a silly broom and wear a silly black hat, doesn't mean that I'm not a witch. I'm a witch all the time and not just on Halloween."

When they go trick-or-treating later that evening, Elizabeth asks Jennifer why she isn't wearing a mask.

She answered that one disguise was enough. She told me that all year long she was a witch, disguised as a perfectly normal girl; on Halloween she became undisguised.

So in my first book, Jennifer decides that masks make you somebody you aren't.

But in a later book, Sabrina in *Journey to an 800 Number* thinks just the opposite. Maximilian, the narrator and hero of this story meets Sabrina, a girl about his age who collects newspaper articles about freaks. Max expresses some impatience with her fascination, and Sabrina replies:

"Maximilian, what you don't seem to understand is that once you're a freak, a born one or a man-made one, anything you do that's normal becomes freakish."

"By your logic, then, anything freakish that a freak does is normal."

"Sure. Now, you take David."

"I know a lot of Davids. Which David?"

"The boy in the bubble in Houston. His name is David. He has something wrong with him so that his body cannot fight germs, so he lives in a room-sized container where air is pumped in and germs are kept out. If you were to sneeze at David, you could kill him. He's nine years old now, and the only reason he has reached the age of nine is that he's never tried to be normal. He never tried to be anything but a freak."

"But Renee was not born defective. She's the victim of an accident. She can still live a normal life."

"I wouldn't call it NORMAL."

"She can overcome what happened to her."

"Overcoming is not normal. Overcoming means always having to do that plus whatever else she wants to do. It's like she will always have to put something on before she puts on her clothes. . . . It's like putting on a suit of armor before you put on your clothes. Everything you wear takes the shape of the armor."

"I'd say that makes it basically hard to relax."

"And to pretend."

"Why would anyone want to pretend?"

"Everyone wants to pretend sometime. Needs to. But freaks . . . cannot live with disguises. Only normal people like you and me and Lilly and Woody have any choice about whether or not we want to present ourselves or present a disguise."

On February 7, 1984, David, the boy in the bubble, was allowed to touch the world unprotected. He crawled out of his bubble and into a hospital room specially equipped to keep the air as sterile as possible. He was kissed by his mother for the first time, gave his father and sister hugs, sat in a chair and heard sounds clearly instead of through plastic. David died on February 22, 1984. He was twelve.

Maybe Sabrina is right: there are times when the only way you can be yourself is to hide behind a mask. But maybe Jennifer is also right: wearing a mask allows you to pretend, to become someone else. And maybe that is a privilege that only normal people have, while those people who are not normal wear a mask so that they can be the person they really are. *Yes* may, after all, be the correct answer to both of those questions.

Masks have a place in my latest novel as well as my first, and in some form they are featured in works in between. For those of us who write fiction, it is Fat Tuesday whenever we go to work. Because we use our characters as masks. Wearing masks is what writers *do*, and the masks that one assumes as a writer serve the same purposes as those at Mardi Gras: they reveal; they conceal; they exaggerate, and they do it all for the sake of getting at some truth that is often seen but not fully understood.

THE HISTORY of a masked storyteller is older than writing itself. Long ago, a priest or shaman donned the mask of an animal whose spirit he wanted to assume. While wearing an appropriate animal mask, he danced and sang to an assembly of tribesmen, relating the courage of the lion, the swiftness of the eagle, the cunning of the wolf. These animals were their tribal totems, their ancestral spirits. Even today we celebrate the vestiges of these totem masks when we say "Go Gators" or when we cheer the Panthers of Pittsburgh, the Nittany Lions or those of Detroit, or the Tigers of Detroit or Clemson or Princeton or LSU.

The Greeks introduced masks into literature through the theater. In ancient Greece, the worship of Dionysus, god of fecundity and the harvest, evolved from impersonating the deity by the donning of goatskins to the making of masks. The masked man spoke in the first person, assuming the persona of the god, and the art of drama was born.

Tellers of folktales do what the shaman and the performers in Greek theater do. Tellers of folktales abstract the characteristics of an animal and form them into stories, but the masks now are words, and there is often a plot to the tale.

Let me show you four wolf masks, four masks that reveal the wolf. This first is a severe, uncompromising mask from the tales of the Brothers Grimm.

[Little Red Riding Hood] went up to the bed and drew back the curtains; there lay the grandmother with her cap pulled over her eyes so that she looked very odd.

"O grandmother, what large ears you have got!"

"The better to hear with."

"O grandmother, what great eyes you have got!"

"The better to see with."

"O grandmother, what large hands you have got!"

"The better to take hold of you with."

"But grandmother, what a terrible large mouth you have got!"

"The better to devour you!" And no sooner had the wolf said it than he made one bound from the bed, and swallowed up poor Little Red Riding Hood.

Then the wolf, having satisfied his hunger, lay down again in the bed, went to sleep, and began to snore loudly.

Here we have the wolf in drag, which would seem to be the converse of the man in the wolf mask, but isn't it still the shaman striking fear and respect into tender hearts? Isn't it still the wolf doing and the wolf saying what the man in a wolf mask believes a wolf would say and do? The story of Little Red Riding Hood is fearsome and uncompromising and altogether suitable for its time and altogether suitable for preschoolers who are equally fearsome and uncompromising.

In time the wolf masks of children's tales grow more sophisticated. In a later story, they are just as feared, but they do not dress up, and they do not speak. Listen to Laura Ingalls Wilder tell about wolves outside the door of her *Little House in the Big Woods*:

At night, when Laura lay awake in the trundle bed, she listened and could not hear anything at all but the sound of the trees whispering together. Sometimes, far away in the night, a wolf howled. Then he came nearer and howled again.

It was a scary sound. Laura knew that wolves would eat little

girls. But she was safe inside the solid log walls. Her father's gun hung over the door and good old Jack, the brindle bull dog, lay on guard before it. Her father would say, "Go to sleep, Laura. Jack won't let the wolves in." So Laura snuggled under the covers of the trundle bed, close beside Mary, and went to sleep.

In this story of frontier life in the late nineteenth century there is a wall between man and the wolf. No one wants to acquire his attributes. There is no "Go Wolverines," here. The wolf at the door was not to be admired but to be feared.

A generation later, fear still features in a portrait of a wolf. But it is fear mingled with admiration. Jack London donned the mask of the heroic lead dog, Buck, to get under the mask of the wolf. This part of the story comes toward the end when Buck discovers that the master who saved his life and whom he loved above all others was dead, and he answers *The Call of the Wild*.

John Thornton was dead. The last tie was broken. Man and the claims of man no longer bound him.

... [T]he wolf pack had at last crossed over from the land of streams and timber and invaded Buck's valley. Into the clearing where the moonlight streamed, they poured in a silvery flood; and in the centre of the clearing stood Buck, motionless as a statue, waiting for their coming. They were awed, so still and large he stood, and a moment's pause fell, till the boldest one leaped straight for him. Like a flash Buck struck, breaking the neck. Then he stood without movement, as before, the stricken wolf rolling in agony behind him. Three others tried it in sharp succession; and one after the other they drew back, streaming blood from slashed throats or shoulders. . . . Pivoting on his hind legs, and snapping and gasping,

[Buck] was everywhere at once. . . . [A]t the end of half an hour the wolves drew back discomfited. The tongues of all were out and lolling, the white fangs showing cruelly white in the moonlight. . . . One wolf, long and lean and gray, advanced cautiously, in a friendly manner. . . . He was whining softly, and, as Buck whined, they touched noses.

Then an old wolf, gaunt and battle-scarred, came forward. Buck writhed his lips into the preliminary of a snarl, but sniffed noses with him. Whereupon the old wolf sat down, pointed nose at the moon, and broke out the long wolf howl. The others sat down and howled. And now the call came to Buck in unmistakable accents. He, too, sat down and howled. . . .

Jack London peeks under the mask of the wolf and finds that all wolves are not alike; they may be killers, but they are selective. Fear is mixed with admiration, not so much for his wolfness, but for those of his traits which border on the human.

Let us now skip two generations and listen to the howl of the wolf as heard by Miyax, a young Eskimo girl lost in the Alaskan wilderness. She is *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George, and this is how she assumes the mask of the wolf.

Miyax pushed back the hood of her sealskin parka and looked at the Arctic sun. It was a yellow disc in a lime-green sky, the colors of six o'clock in the evening and the time when the wolves awoke. . . . [S]he. . . focused her attention on the wolves she had come upon two sleeps ago. They were wagging their tails as they awoke and saw each other.

Her hands trembled and her heartbeat quickened, for she was frightened, not so much of the wolves, who were shy and many harpoon-shots away, but because of her desperate predicament.

Miyax was lost. . . without food for many sleeps. . . and the very life in her. . . depended upon these wolves for survival. . .

She had been watching the wolves for two days, trying to discern which of their sounds and movements expressed goodwill and friendship. . . If she could discover such a gesture. . . she would be able to make friends with them and share their food. . .

"AMAROQ, ILAYA, wolf, my friend," she finally called. "Look at me. Look at me."

She spoke half in Eskimo and half in English, as if the instincts of her father and the science of the GUSSAKS, the white-faced, might evoke some magical combination that would help her get her message through to the wolf.

The science of the *gussak* and the instincts of her Eskimo father do conspire within Julie; she succeeds in communicating her hunger to the wolves, and they bring her caribou meat.

From Little Red Riding Hood to Julie covers a great interior distance: from being eaten by a wolf to being fed by one. From inside the wolf mask to inside a wolf's head. The distance is not only great but also deep. Under the wolf mask you might feel close to the wolf, but from these stories, you can feel intimate with him.

Children who have the great good fortune to read, or be read, the books in which these wolf stories are told can know more and fear less than those who sit in the assembly of the tribal elder who has donned the totem mask of the wolf. Books allow us to know the wolf's fierceness and tenacity, yes, but we can also know his loyalty. We can know his pride as leader of the pack, but we can also know his nobility in defeat. We can know more and can imagine more.

When the masks are books, we can pass down to fu-

ture generations not only the fearsome magic of a single shaman in a totem mask but the richer magic of many. We can pass down a whole trunkful of wolf masks, and we can have them ready in sizes to fit all ages. We can let our children and our grandchildren know the wolf of the many writers who have donned his mask.

NEW ORLEANS is not the only city famous for its Carnival. Rio and Venice are famous, too. All three of these cities share an exotic geography—one that is intimate with water—and each has its particular traditions, but whether the festival celebrates Fat Tuesday as it does in New Orleans and Rio or whether it celebrates the Ascension as it does in Venice, all of them celebrate with masks. The festival in Venice is the oldest of the three, and at the time of the Renaissance, when a nobleman pinned a mask to his lapel, it was a reminder to others that he was traveling incognito.

Does making an announcement that you are traveling incognito seem a contradiction of terms? Batman and the Lone Ranger always did; Romeo wore a mask to the house of the Capulets. Movie stars used to wear dark glasses to indicate that they were traveling incognito. Nowadays, even though sunglasses have become a fashion statement, they still function as a mask of incognito for those of us who are less than celebrity but have run out to the grocery store without makeup—another one of our everyday masks.

Sometimes the choice to travel incognito is not ours to make.

Saturday, 20 June 1942

I haven't written for a few days, because I wanted first of all to think about my diary. It's an odd idea for someone like me to keep a diary; not only because I have never done so before, but because it seems to me that neither I—nor for that matter anyone else—will be interested in the unbosomings of a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl. . . .

. . . I [was born] on June 12, 1929, and, as we are Jewish, we emigrated to Holland in 1933. . . .

After May 1940 good times rapidly fled: first the war, then the capitulation, followed by the arrival of the Germans, which was when the sufferings of us Jews really began. Anti-Jewish decrees followed each other in quick succession. Jews must wear a yellow star. . . .

Wednesday, 8 July 1942

Dear Kitty,

Years seem to have passed between Sunday and now. So much has happened, it is just as if the whole world had turned upside down. . . . Margot told me that the call-up was. . . for her. I was more frightened than ever and began to cry. Margot is sixteen; would they really take girls of that age away alone? But thank goodness she won't go, Mummy said so herself; that must be what Daddy meant when he talked about us going into hiding. . . .

Thursday, 9 July 1942

Dear Kitty,

So we walked in the pouring rain, Daddy, Mummy, and I, each with a school satchel and shopping bag filled to the brim with all kinds of things thrown together anyhow.

We got sympathetic looks from people on their way to work. You could see by their faces how sorry they were they couldn't offer us a lift; the gaudy yellow star spoke for itself.

The gaudy yellow star was a badge that rendered Anne Frank, her mother, and her father incognito to the point of being nonpeople. They became invisible. And when they lost their mask of invisibility, Anne Frank, her mother, and her sister Margot lost their lives.

Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl was not published as a children's book, but children have adopted it. As they read it, they learn not only what it feels like to be incognito but also what it is like to have a long, penetrating look at your inner self because your outer self has been rendered invisible. It is one of those books that youngsters in the fifth and sixth grades re-read and re-re-read and do so each time with anticipation and discovery.

Saturday, 15 July 1944

... It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. . . .

The diary of Anne Frank is an introspective book, and those fifth- and sixth-graders who read it over and over are introspective readers. It has been my experience that children re-read books they love up until they enter the seventh grade. I think there are several reasons why this is so. One reason, of course, is that the assigned reading load becomes heavier in the seventh grade, but there is another, more poetic reason why this is so, and in order to explore it, I must tell you about the Bapendes tribe of the Congo.

Before a Bapendes youth can be proclaimed a man, he undergoes a long ordeal—the details of which I do not know—after which he appears to the elders of the tribe *wearing a mask representing the ghost of his childhood*. I know of only one other elaboration of the ritual of the Bapendes, but I would like to talk about that a little later.

Right now, I want to think about a mask that represents the ghost of one's childhood.

Would you, all of you, please take a minute to think about such a mask? Would you, all of you, think about making one? Don't try for a photographic representation of you as a child but try to design a mask of the ghost of your childhood.

There is a lot to be decided. What materials will you use? Will your mask be clay or wood or papier mâché? Will it be woven of yarn? Will the mask of your childhood be pastel or bright? Will it be happy or frowning? Is it fat and full or thin and skimpy? Is it knit together with wool of many colors? Is it cast in stone?

This not an easy assignment.

Think about it, please, will you?

Close your eyes if it helps and promise not to cry.



Do you have an image?

Is the mask of the ghost of your childhood still unfinished?

We have probably all built the mask of the ghost of our childhood on an armature made from a branch of some family tree, and we have stretched the material of family life over that frame. There are probably holes and patches—quarrels and reconciliations—in everyone's fabric, but I'm willing to bet that every mask is covered with a lacy web of dreams. Dreams of what we will see. Dreams of what we will be. Dreams that must remain on the mask of the ghost of your childhood to help define it. The web of dreams may not be the skeleton of your mask, but doesn't that web hold it together? And make it your very own?

Is there a silvery thread in that web of dreams where you were a knight in shining armor? Is there a sturdy woolen skein where you had a nanny and lived in a proper English household? Did you talk to animals? Were you kidnapped? Were you an orphan growing up in India? or

England? Colonial America? Did you ride an elephant? A river boat? A covered wagon? Did you fly? Did you travel through time? What are the threads of dreams that cover the mask of the ghost of your childhood?

Those readers who are re-reading Anne Frank's diary and whose letters tell me that they have re-read books of mine are, I believe, gathering materials for their masks. Those readers are not sure what materials they need or how much they need, and as they add to and take away, they re-read books that they can mine for raw materials. The responsibility is awesome.

I am convinced that the re-reading stops when the material gathering stops and that is the time when the young man or the young woman is asked at last to construct the mask of the ghost of his childhood, and nowadays, that is often at the end of the sixth grade when the child is twelve.

Being twelve is special. It is the end of childhood, it is the April of our years. April is the cruelest month, and twelve is the cruelest age. It is a watershed in one's emotional development. A wise librarian once told me that if Booth Tarkington were to write *Seventeen* today, he would have to call it *Twelve*. I think that when I was growing up, he would have called it *Fourteen*, and four hundred years ago it would have been *Nineteen*. I didn't pick the number *nineteen* out of the air.

Recently, I was listening to a radio interview with a director of Renaissance choral music. When asked why he had included female voices even though no women's parts were included at the time the music has been written, the choral director replied that it was necessary to use female voices to achieve the full range of the music. He elaborated

by saying that there were very few years when he could have a fully trained male soprano. He can not start them until the age of nine or ten and then, by the age of thirteen, their voices begin to change. Whereas, years ago, when Renaissance music was being written, male voices changed much, much later—sometimes as late as nineteen.

Nowadays, like it or not, twelve seems to be the age at which children carve their masks. It is the age at which the peer group begins to pull—and pull strongly. If that mask is not deeply carved, if it is not made of good material, if it does not have its own contouring veil of dreams, if it is set out and allowed to be painted on or rubbed smooth by peers, it can never, never be really and truly one's own.

Those of us who write for children must give them a variety of masks to try on, and we must write rich and deep so that they can choose what materials they want for the body of that mask. And we must provide threads of many colors to let them weave the web of fantasies to lay over its surface.

We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and writers have a great responsibility to provide the raw stuff of those dreams. Writers—unlike producers of television shows or movies—can provide the one ingredient that I offered before when inviting readers to try on wolf masks. And that is intimacy. Intimacy—that degree of privacy that is plural but not public—is the place where we can try on an eccentric mask and, wearing it, pose this way and that. It is the place where we can unself-consciously shape a dream to make it fit and where we can reject those masks we don't like, for the invisible weaver need never know that we have tried on something he fashioned—or that we have rejected it.

Tuesday, 4 April 1944

Dear Kitty,

... I want to go on living even after my death! And therefore I am grateful to God for giving me this gift, this possibility of developing myself and of writing, of expressing all that is in me. ...

I wish I could tell Anne Frank that she has gone on living. She has helped many children shape the masks of the ghosts of their childhoods.

MASKS CAN REVEAL; they can conceal; but they all exaggerate. And therein lies some of the truths they tell.

Several years ago I wrote a book called *Up from Jericho Tel*. Jeanmarie begins telling her story as follows:

There was a time when I was eleven years old—between the start of a new school year and Midwinter's Night—when I was invisible. I was never invisible for long, and I always returned to plain sight, but all my life has been affected by the people I met and the time I spent in a world where I could see and not be seen.

Being invisible is, of course, the most exaggerated mask of incognito. Jeanmarie's invisible life begins when she falls into Jericho Tel and meets Tallulah, the ghost of a famous actress who sits on an enormous sofa piled high with pastel-colored pillows, and who, as Jeanmarie says, "told wonderful stories about the theater, and who always had something funny to say."

Jeanmarie remembered many of the things Tallulah

said and wrote them at the beginnings of her chapters. At the beginning of chapter 16, this appears:

Tallulah says, "If you want to learn the difference between accuracy and truth, look at a photograph of Gertrude Stein and then look at Pablo Picasso's portrait of her."

According to *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, here is a description of how Picasso came to paint that famous portrait.

[Gertrude] took her pose, Picasso sat very tight in his chair and very close to his canvas. . . and the painting began. . . . All of a sudden Picasso painted out the whole head. I can't see you any more when I look, he said irritably, and so the picture was left like that.

Some months later he . . . returned to the faceless portrait and imposed the intense, discordant mask without looking at the sitter. The face clashes against the body to create the picture's grip. This ritual mask has now taken the place of all camera likenesses as our idea of Gertrude Stein.

Picasso said, "We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth."

Tallulah and Alice B. Toklas would say that the mask delivers a truth that the camera cannot.

There is a point beyond which accuracy does not matter.

My college education and my first work experience was in the world of science, and it was there that I learned the language of millimeters. It is in the world of science that accuracy is most prized, but even in science there are limits. There is, for example, the case of pi. Pi is the constant made famous in sixth grade when we learned that the for-

mula for finding the area of a circle is πr^2 . Pi is the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter. We first knew pi informally as three and one-seventh, and later we got to know it as 3.14159, which we were allowed to round off to 3.1416. At the end of the nineteenth century, an obscure British mathematician named William Shanks—when both calculators and anabolic steroids were unknown—spent twenty years working out pi to 707 decimal places—only to fumble after 527. The 528th decimal place of pi is 4, but Shanks called it 5, and from there on all his digits were wrong. But here's the thing of it: for more than seventy years no one knew that the 528th decimal place of pi was 5 and not 4, and for all those years no one cared.

However, as computers became faster and more sophisticated, some technicians calculated more and more decimal places of pi, and in 1973, a French mathematician reached a million, and the French, being very proud of this accomplishment, published the million decimal places of pi as a 400-page book. It has never made the *New York Times* best-seller list. By 1988 the Japanese extended that million decimal places to 201 million, and in 1989, the Year of the Young Reader, David and Gregory Chudnovsky of MIT calculated pi to 480 million decimal places. Their record is still holding, but then, it is very new, and there are all those *Guinness Book of Records* junkies out there.

Even the brothers Chudnovsky would probably admit that 480 million decimal places of pi don't say too much more than good old 3.1416 did. There is a point beyond which accuracy may have rhythm but no meaning.

The business of accuracy and truth is a tricky one. If you want to see something that is accurate but not true, I would once again recommend Williamsburg, Virginia.

There everything is accurately reconstructed down to the last quarter inch. Everything is tied down, wrapped up, a neatly packaged, pretty good imitation of the truth. But that which is exaggerated often tells a greater truth.

The masks, the painted faces, the costumes, the exaggerations of Mardi Gras showed a truth just as the masks, the painted faces, and the costumes do in the theater. In Ancient Greek theater, when a player wanted to take on several roles, he would put on a different mask for each role. So that the audience sitting in the back rows would not mistake who was talking, the features of the masks were exaggerated. Even today, in live theater, actors apply makeup that is so heavy, it is called *greasepaint*. And when a civilian appears in makeup that is heavily applied, we call such exaggerated makeup *theatrical*.

It is the role of masks to exaggerate. Who's to say which is the real Tammy Bakker: the face? or the mask?

As any good humorist will tell you, there is truth in exaggeration.

It has been said that the difference between English and American humor is that the English make the ordinary seem extraordinary, and the Americans make the extraordinary seem ordinary. Both imply exaggeration.

Take this example by a quintessential American humorist, Mark Twain. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is about to set out in search of adventure:

I was to have an early breakfast, and start at dawn, for that was the usual way; but I had the demon's own time with my armor, and this delayed me a little. It is troublesome to get into, and there is so much detail. First you wrap a layer or two of blanket around your body, for a sort of cushion. . . . then you put on your sleeves

and shirt of chain mail—these are made of small steel links woven together. . . it is very heavy and is nearly the uncomfortablest material in the world. . . then you put on your shoes—flat-boats roofed over with interleaving bands of steel—and screw your clumsy spurs into the heels. Next you buckle your greaves on your legs, and your cuisses on your thighs; then you begin to feel crowded; then you hitch onto the breast-plate the half-petticoat of broad overlapping bands of steel which hangs down in front but is scalloped out behind so you can sit down, and isn't any real improvement. . . either for looks or for wear, or to wipe your hands on; next you belt on your sword; then you put your stove-pipe joints onto you arms, your iron gauntlets onto your hands, your iron rat-trap onto your head, with a rag of steel web hitched onto it to have over the back of your neck—and there you are, snug as a candle in a candle-mold.

The boys helped me, or I never could have got in. Just as we finished, Sir Bedivere happened in, and I saw that as like as not I hadn't chosen the most convenient outfit for a long trip. . .

Exaggerated understatement renders the extraordinary ordinary and makes it funny. And makes it true. Humor can do what no long, detailed, and accurate catalog of arming a knight ever could.

Fiction delivers. Humor delivers accurately.

I MENTIONED EARLIER that there is one other elaboration of the rite of the Bapendes tribe of the Congo that I know about. It is this: After the young man passes through the ritual of making a mask of the ghost of his childhood, that mask is cast aside and replaced by a small ivory duplicate which is worn as a charm against misfortune and as a symbol of his manhood.

Do you carry a small charm of your childhood with you?

Even psychiatrists might think it a healthy thing to take out a replica mask of your childhood to look at and polish up every now and then. It might not be a bad idea to review the web of fantasies that once you laid down thread by thread.

Does Charlotte write in that web? Does Mary Poppins walk there? Did you ride an elephant with Kim? Do you have a Secret Garden in England? Did you find treasure? Did you float down the Mississippi River on a raft?

In *Up from Jericho* Tel, Tallulah has this to say:

. . . [T]he camera got harsher and harsher. I have never thought it fair that by the time I could play any age at all—having been through them all—the only thing the camera picked up was an old lady. I'll never forgive the camera for that. The camera does lie, darlings. It never sees the girl within the woman, and that girl is always there. Remember that, whenever you see an old lady. There's still part of her that is just twelve years old.

The camera lied about Tallulah because it was too literal, too accurate, and could not pick up the replica mask of the ghost of her childhood. The camera cannot scan for it, but we can. If we look, we can find it in a person or in his work. I think Picasso carried a replica mask of his childhood with him. I think Einstein did, too. The late Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman did; and the Nobel Laureate Barbara McClintock does. Faulkner did; Hemingway did not. Mozart did; Beethoven did not. Early J. D. Salinger did; late Salinger does not. Maurice Sendak: yes, always. Barbara Bush, yes; Nancy just said no.

Walk the beaches in south Florida, and every now and then, you will find a few people wearing masks of wrinkles and gauntlets of liver spots, but who have hidden—out of focus of any camera—the replica masks of the ghosts of their childhoods. They are the ones who can still be astonished, the ones who are still curious and who continue to feel outrage at things other than the high cost of living and the low monthly payments of social security. They are the adults with perspective, with humor, and—very often—with a book in their hands. They are the ones who know that they have not been able to wear all the masks they once read about, but they are glad that on the small replica of the mask they carry, there is evidence that—once upon a time—they tried them on.

I am not a poker player, and I cannot marry everyone I really want to know. I cannot take them all to Mardi Gras either, but I can ask them what children's books they've read. If you really want to know someone, ask him that. Ask him what children's books he's read.

SOMEONE ONCE SAID, "If I can write all the nation's ballads, I don't care who writes its laws." In this fortunate career I have, I have often said to myself, "If I can write all the nation's children's books, I don't care who writes its laws."

A year ago last spring, I spoke at a children's literature festival in suburban Baltimore. The following day, I was to meet my son, Paul, at a restaurant in the Inner Harbor. It was early evening when I arrived; shops and offices were closing, and as I walked across the floor of the restaurant to see if I could spot Paul's car in the parking lot, I heard

a young man call my name. He introduced himself and told me that he had gone to hear my lecture the previous evening and that he had enjoyed it very much, and I was flattered to learn that he had driven in the rain from Baltimore to the far reaches of its suburbs to hear me. He asked me to join him for a drink. As we sat down, he said, "I was in a bookstore some years ago. As I was looking over the shelves of children's books, I saw *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley and Me, Elizabeth*, and I said to the young woman standing next to me, whom I didn't know at the time, 'That is my all-time favorite children's book.' She said, 'Mine, too.'" He smiled and added, "I married that young woman."

I know I can't write all the nation's children's books, but I have written some. And that will do. Writing some is a double privilege. Not only do I get to take out that small replica mask of my childhood and pull at the threads of its fantasies and weave them into new ones but also—because I have written *some*—I know that for two young people in Baltimore, Maryland, there exists on the masks of their childhoods a little girl named Jennifer sitting in a tree. And maybe for others she sits there in the divine company of a little girl named Anne Frank who is more visible in death than she was in life. And for others, maybe not for many—but for some—on the replica mask of the ghost of their childhoods, there is a small stain of another ghost named Tallulah who wants you to preserve the mask beneath your face. And wants you to look for it in others.

And so do I.

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Colophon

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